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### Sometimes Putting Pen to Paper is Tougher than it Seems

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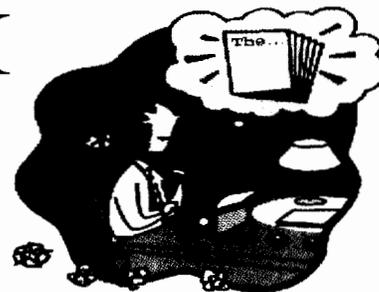
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# WRITER'S BLOCK

## SOMETIMES PUTTING PEN TO PAPER IS TOUGHER THAN IT SEEMS!

BY DAVID H. SPRATT & HEATHER E. RIDENOUR



I guess time flies when you are having fun. Almost three years have passed since I started writing this column. Some might recall that the subject of that first column was "writer's block," and I offered some tips on how to jump start your writing when the creative juices just don't seem to be flowing.

I have writer's block.

A bit ironic, I admit, but as my deadline loomed, I struggled to think of a new topic and have decided to revisit methods of overcoming writer's block. I also decided to bring in a guest columnist, Professor Heather Ridenour, who will help me make what was old look new again.

Writer's Block: Wikipedia (hey, you, too, have used it before!) defines writer's block as a "phenomenon involving temporary loss of ability to begin or continue writing, usually due to lack of inspiration or creativity."

Whatever the definition and no matter the cause, even the best writers have experienced writer's block before. Unfortunately, it happens to the best of us. Would that we could articulate a quick fix, but alas, we are just legal writing professors. There are, however, some common techniques that can usually help even the most experienced writer overcome writer's block:

**1 Write Like There is No Tomorrow:** Just start writing. Do not be concerned with what the text sounds like. Just try to get your thoughts down on paper. Take this quote to heart, and feel better about that substandard first draft:

All good writers write [awful first drafts]. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. ... I know some very great writers, ... who write beautifully, ... and not one of them ... writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. ...

A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. ... And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth. ...!

**2 Dance to the Beat of a Different Drummer:** When stuck, try something new. If writing a brief or motion, for example, perhaps presenting the facts chronologically isn't always the best idea; sometimes topical or even reverse chronology is more effective. Be willing to experiment. If you find yourself staring aimlessly at a blank screen or piece of paper, talk through your ideas with a colleague or friend (even a four-legged one). Doing so often allows you to get out your thoughts, showing you that you can actually think of ideas and write an effective document. Through trial and error, you will improve and overcome the stalemate.

**3 Sweat the Small Stuff:** When you are overwhelmed, focus on a smaller subtask. For example, if you are drafting a motion and the facts you need to present to the court seem too convoluted or overwhelming, start working on the prayer for relief—you know what you want the court to do (or hopefully you wouldn't be drafting the motion). By trying to do less at once, you will reduce your stress and, eventually, accomplish the larger task.

**4 Nobody's Perfect:** Strive for excellence, not perfection. Deadlines, costs, and reality make a perfect document the thing of legend. Mediocrity won't hack it, but excellence will.

**5 Keep Your Eyes on the Prize:** Keep a big picture focus—what is essential to satisfy your audience and achieve your purpose? If time permits, add in bells and whistles; if not, address the essentials.

**6 Send Flowers:** Dr. Betty Flowers astutely observes that often the hardest part of writing is to resist the urge to critique and edit one's work before completing a draft. In *Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process*, Dr. Flowers postulates that each step in the writing process is based on a "character" that each of us has within, and each character must have time on-stage to produce effective writing. Try each character in order, and see if you can get past your writer's block:

a. The madman, out-of-control, writes quickly and without focus, researching, taking copious notes, and jotting down ideas about possible approaches to a problem.

b. Enter the architect, who sees connections between ideas, and starts drafting an outline.

c. In struts the carpenter who creates a rough draft—although the carpenter does not polish or edit, a master carpenter always has some discretion and responsibility for changing the plans to suit last-minute needs.

d. Finally, the judge comes in to carefully scrutinize each word, engaging in meticulous proofreading and editing.

**7 When All Else Fails, Drink a Glass of Virginia Wine!:** I know, yet another plug for Virginia wine, but seriously, when you do something unrelated to legal writing, your mind will continue to work on your first drafts, and you will be generating ideas.

As always, well-proofread, grammatically correct questions, comments, and suggestions (as long as they contain a brief pleasantry) at [dspratt@wcl.american.edu](mailto:dspratt@wcl.american.edu) are welcomed.

1. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 21-22, 25-26 (1994).

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